

The Woman's Realm: The Daily Mail and Female Readers

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The Daily Mail played a pioneering role in integrating women into the daily newspaper market. Northcliffe's pursuit of the female audience was far more consistent and committed than previous exponents of popular journalism, and it was his success that ensured the Mail's competitors soon followed its lead. After 1896 Northcliffe moved the female reader from the margins to the centre of editorial calculations, ensuring that the definition of 'news' was radically altered, that the boundary between 'public' and 'private' was redrawn, and that the visibility of women in public discourse was transformed. More than a century later, the Mail is still known for its skill in attracting female readers. A commercial interest in the female audience did not necessarily translate into 'progressive' attitudes to gender, however. Northcliffe took a long time to be persuaded that women deserved the vote, and throughout its existence the Mail has been criticized for failing to be sufficiently supportive of working women. While some women were hooked by the diet of fashion, domesticity and celebrity, others were dismayed at the paper's tendency to pander to traditional gender stereotypes.



Three young society beauties: Baroness Hindlip, Lady Mary Stanley and Lady Vivian. These were first used by the Daily Mail on 16 March 1904

Feminizing the Paper

The Mail explicitly addressed women from its very first issue on 4 May 1896. Northcliffe was determined that the content of the newspaper be broadened by including a page of features – heralded as the ‘Daily Magazine, An Entirely New Idea In Morning Journalism’, which would provide every week ‘matter equivalent to a sixpenny monthly’ – and he ensured that space was explicitly marked out for women’s interests. The paper made a firm commitment to female readers:

Movements in a woman’s world – that is to say, changes in dress, toilet matters, cookery, and home matters generally – are as much entitled to receive attention as nine out of ten of the matters which are treated of in the ordinary daily paper. Therefore, two columns are set aside exclusively for ladies.¹

This section was not to be a haven for amateurs. The paper announced that the ‘department will be under the direction of a lady who till recently occupied the editorial chair of a leading fashion weekly’ (Mary Howarth) and underlined that the various subjects under consideration ‘will all be treated by experts’. Across the page, a signed article by ‘Lady Charlotte’ gave readers a hint of the aristocratic sophistication that would be put at their disposal.² The paper was determined to convey that this content was not an afterthought, but was the product of careful editorial consideration. Northcliffe himself displayed a genuine determination that the women’s section should be treated as seriously as any other department. He ordered that recipes be checked by his own chef, and insisted that articles and stories were accurate and consistent: those he suspected of being casual were, as one trusted journalist observed, ‘flayed alive’.³ As time went on, Northcliffe carried out his own forms of market research to ensure that the women’s page remained relevant and readable: he warned the editor that he had ‘fifty women of all classes’ giving their opinion of the features.⁴ ‘Don’t be bluffed by journalists with only a men’s outlook,’ he counselled staff, ‘Read the woman’s page every day.’⁵

As the initial announcement made clear, the ‘woman’s world’ was defined fairly conservatively, following the tradition of the nineteenth-century women’s magazine.⁶ Mrs Peel, who became editor of the women’s page during the First World War, recalled with frustration how Mail journalists ‘expected women to be interested solely in knitting jumpers, in caring for their complexions, looking after babies, in cooking, in a “good murder” and in silly stories about weddings’.⁷ On the other hand, the Mail was challenging established conceptions of what constituted ‘news’ and what was ‘important’ enough to be reported in a morning newspaper. If this women’s material was as worthy of inclusion as ‘nine out ten matters’ that were usually covered, then the conventional privileging of the ‘public sphere’ as the location of the ‘serious’ business of life was brought into question. In practical terms, moreover, it gave women an important foothold in the male-dominated national press, ensuring both a greater visibility and opportunities to voice their concerns; once the space had been established, more challenging material could, and would, be included. In any case, the value of this fashion and domestic advice should not be dismissed: it proved to be popular with large numbers of female readers, for it engaged with actual interests and concerns in a pragmatic way.

¹ *Daily Mail*, 4 May 1896, p. 7.

² Ibid.

³ N. Angell, *After All: The Autobiography of Norman Angell*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1951), pp. 120–1.

⁴ Northcliffe bulletins, 11 May 1920.

⁵ T. Clarke, *My Northcliffe Diary* (London: Hutchinson, 1931), p. 279.

⁶ On 19th-century women’s magazines, see M. Beetham, *A Magazine of her Own?: Domesticity and Desire in the Woman’s Magazine 1800–1914* (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁷ C.S. Peel, *Life’s Enchanted Cup: An Autobiography* (London: John Lane, 1933), p. 227.

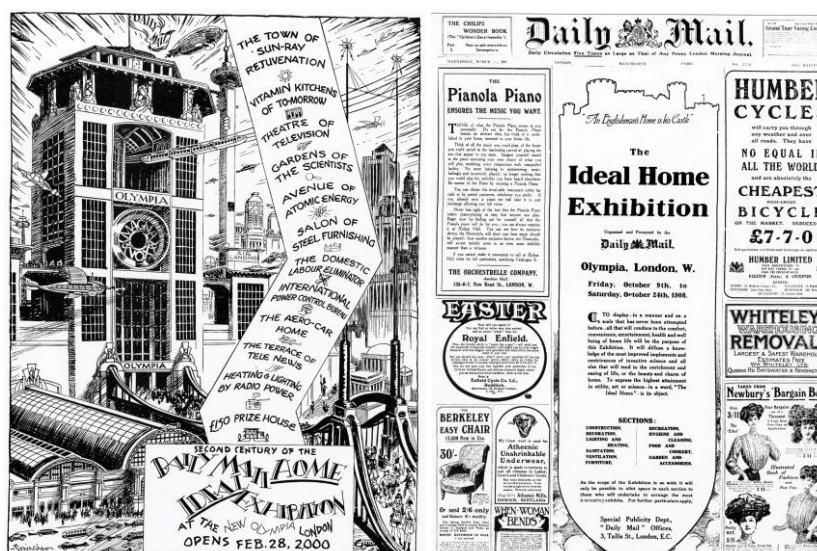
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Margaret Lane, one of the Mail's star journalists of the 1930s, and Dame Ann Leslie, a prolific and celebrated contributor since 1967.

The Advertising Incentive

Female readers were important not just because they boosted the overall circulation statistics: they had a special economic importance to the newspaper business. Women were the major spenders of the domestic budget, and hence the prime targets for advertisers. As newspapers came to rely ever more heavily on the revenue from branded advertising, reaching female readers became a financial necessity. Mrs Peel understood that the whole newspaper enterprise 'depended upon the goodwill of women – for it is women who spend the greater part of men's earnings and so make advertisements pay, and without advertisements no paper can live'.¹⁴ Northcliffe found that advertisements had a circulation value as well. Attempting to lift rather flat early week sales, he offered concessions to department store advertisers – and was rewarded by circulation increases.¹⁵ Newsprint rationing during the First World War meant that there was not enough space to include the women's page, so Northcliffe insisted that his advertisement manager give preference to advertisements which appealed to women. 'Drapery advertisements,' he observed, 'are news to them ... Now that we have abolished the women's column, it is more than ever necessary not to neglect this important department.'¹⁶

The centrality of advertising ensured that the Mail was infused with an aspirational atmosphere. Northcliffe was adamant, 'Nine women out of ten would rather read about an evening dress costing a great deal of money – the sort of dress they will never in their lives have a chance of wearing – than about a simple frock such as they could afford.'¹⁷ Such attitudes encouraged the continued expansion of celebrity journalism across the century. The desire to attract advertising also encouraged the introduction of Daily Mail-branded events. The most notable of these was the Daily Mail's Ideal Home Exhibition, still flourishing today. The exhibition was first held in 1908, initially as a publicity stunt and a new means of securing advertising.¹⁸ Northcliffe himself initially disliked intensely what he regarded as a 'sideshow', but reluctantly accepted its commercial value; after the First World War he gradually came to appreciate its worth as a source of features about developments in the home. Henceforth, the Mail publicized the exhibition extensively in its pages, and championed the idea of remodelling domestic life to make it suitable for the modern age.



Left: Ideal Homes Exhibition advertisement on the front page of the Daily Mail, 25 March 1908
Right: A poster for the Ideal Home Exhibition 2000

¹⁴ Peel, *Autobiography*, pp. 229–30.

¹⁵ Major Harrison, London Press Exchange to Royal Commission on the Press, *Minutes of Evidence*, (London: HMSO, 1948), Day 8, Cmd. 7336, 6.

¹⁶ Northcliffe Bulletins, 9 March 1918.

¹⁷ H. Fyfe, *Northcliffe: An Intimate Biography* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1930), p. 93.

¹⁸ W. Smith, *Spilt Ink*, (London: Ernest Benn, 1932), 66–7; D. S. Ryan, *The Ideal Home through the Twentieth Century* (London: Hazar, 1997), 9.

The Resilience of Traditional Gender Stereotypes

Northcliffe's forward thinking with regard to the female market was tempered by what one of his journalists described as 'an old-fashioned doubt' as to whether women were 'really the equals of men'.¹⁹ He continued to view women as being largely defined by their roles as wives and mothers, and the 'women's material' for his papers was produced on these terms. He was also happy to exploit female glamour and sexuality. 'I have no use for a man who cannot appreciate a pretty ankle,' Northcliffe told his news editor Tom Clarke.²⁰ In his bulletins to the Mail he frequently reminded his staff of the need to display glamorous women and he was critical when his picture editor picked out what he regarded as 'common-looking ugly wenches'.²¹ When a photograph of Polish women soldiers appeared in August 1920 he was furious: 'Pictures of attractive English ladies would have been much more to the point. I am almost weary of repeating this.'²²



Left: Bathing Beauties from 1927



Right: Princess Diana attends the charity premiere of *Back to the Future – Part III* at the Empire in London's Leicester Square

Northcliffe was for a long time sceptical about the need for female suffrage, a scepticism that was reproduced in the columns of the Mail and which only evaporated as a result of women's committed service on the Home Front during the First World War. Although the Mail generally embraced the expansion of women's roles after 1918, Rothermere's concern about the prospect of young women voting for the Labour party led to the Mail vociferously opposing the Baldwin government's proposal to equalize the franchise at 21 (in 1918 only women over 30 were granted the vote). Daily headlines implored the government to 'Stop the Flapper Vote Folly'; the measure was censured as 'worthy of Bedlam' and if passed, the Mail warned darkly that it 'may bring down the British Empire in ruins'.²³ The Mail's opposition achieved little other than to show its continued anxieties about women's roles.

The ambivalence about gender has remained characteristic of the Mail. The Mail has continued to have greater success in attracting female readers than most of its rivals, largely due its skill in appealing to the section of the

¹⁹ Fyfe, *Northcliffe*, 94.

²⁰ Clarke, *My Northcliffe Diary*, p. 246.

²¹ Northcliffe Bulletins, 1 Aug. 1920.

²² Northcliffe Bulletins, 6 Aug. 1920.

²³ *Daily Mail*, 31 Mar. 1927, 10; 7 Nov. 1927, 10; A. Bingham, "'Stop the Flapper Vote Folly': Rothermere, the *Daily Mail* and the Equalisation of the Franchise 1927-28', *Twentieth Century British History*, 13, 1, (2002), 17–37.

market hungry for lifestyle and celebrity features. In 1936 it introduced a problem column, Ann Temple's 'Human Case-Book', which generated considerable interest: Temple admitted that she was 'absolutely astounded' by the volume of post she received in response to her first column.²⁴ When the social research organization Mass Observation investigated the national press in 1948, they found that Temple received 'warmer tributes than perhaps any other feature writer encountered' in the survey.²⁵ This popularity was achieved despite Temple's fairly stern sense of morality: she tried to make a stand against what she saw as a damaging creed of 'self-first' and the associated change 'from respect for marriage into the belief that love matters more than marriage'.²⁶ The women's section was once again revitalized in 1969 by the arrival of Shirley Conran and its rebranding as 'Femail'. These changes were consolidated in 1971 when Vere Harmsworth (who had recently taken over as Chairman of Associated Newspapers), and new editor David English, relaunched the Mail as a tabloid. Harmsworth captured the spirit of Northcliffe when he insisted that 'We have to direct ourselves to women', providing 'a news coverage that women want to read'.²⁷ English and his successor, Paul Dacre, followed this advice closely, and invested heavily in the feature pages aimed primarily at the female audience.

At the same time, the paper has been consistently sceptical in its coverage of organized feminism.²⁸ Outspoken columnists such as Lynda Lee-Potter have blamed the women's movement for many of the ills of modern society. Many women have felt that the flipside of the Mail's staunch defence of 'family values' has been a critical approach to women trying to combine motherhood with a career. Others have pointed to the way in which the paper has scrutinized the female body and sneered at imperfections. A characteristic article from March 2003, for example, revealed the 'swimsuit age' of stars snapped on the beach. Thirty-year-old pop star Mariah Carey was given a 'swimsuit age' of 45 because she had 'let herself go' and displayed 'chunky thighs'. Sailor Ellen MacArthur, meanwhile, 'may be fit but her body is chunky. She hasn't had children yet, but already looks rather matronly.' Criticisms from feminists and the left have been easy to brush off while the Mail's tried-and-trusted formula remains appealing to a sufficient number of readers; indeed, the success of Mailonline, the paper's sister website, suggests that the formula is more successful than ever. The Mail is likely to continue to entertain and infuriate women in equal measure.

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²⁴ Ann Temple, *Good or Bad – It's Life* (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1944), 5.

²⁵ Mass-Observation File Report, 2557, 'Attitudes to Daily Newspapers', Jan. 1948 (repr. Brighton: Harvester Press Microform Publications, 1983), 27.

²⁶ Temple, *Good or Bad*, p. 83.

²⁷ S. J. Taylor, *The Reluctant Press Lord: Esmond Rothermere and the Daily Mail* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1998), 211.

²⁸ Kaitlynn Mendes, *Feminism in the News: Representations of the Women's Movement since the 1960s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 132, 148.